

U.S. SOFTENS TONE ON LITHUANIA ISSUE

White House Is Not Prepared to Side With the Republic

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WASHINGTON, March 27 — After days of steadily tougher talk on Lithuania, the White House softened its tone today. In the wake of the first overt use of Soviet military force in the Baltic republic, the United States made it clear that it was not prepared to take Lithuania's side in a test of wills with Moscow.

Western European leaders, concerned about wider repercussions of the Baltic crisis, also neither encouraged nor rejected Lithuania's claim to independence. They avoided any direct criticism of the Soviet Army's reportedly violent roundup of Lithuanian deserters in Vilnius early today.

Bush Administration officials said privately that they were unhappy about the roundup. But in public, spokesmen for the White House and the State Department refused to criticize the move or even to comment specifically on it.

Tougher Message in Private

Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman, reiterated Washington's call for negotiations between Lithuania and Moscow and said "any other resolution runs the risk of being counterproductive" for Soviet-American relations. But he and other official spokesmen dropped earlier talk of "escalating tensions" and a "pattern of intimidation" by the Kremlin in Lithuania.

"I choose not to do it today," Mr. Fitzwater said, referring to his earlier harsh remarks. "We are worried that our comments might be portrayed in

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such a way as they would be unhelpful."

Reflecting on the day's official statements, one official said: "There comes a point where you either go forward or you go back, and today was the day we went back. From here on, you just dance around it and hope it goes away."

Later in the day, concerned that news accounts would say the Administration had backed down, Administration officials stressed that a tougher message than the public stand was being sent to Moscow through private diplomatic contacts.

In private strategy sessions, the Administration has laid out a series of possible responses to a Soviet crackdown, the most serious of which, to be saved for a last resort, would be canceling the planned summit meeting in June, officials said.

On Capitol Hill, protests against the Bush Administration's approach to Lithuania grew louder as lawmakers denounced the roundup of Lithuanian deserters.

Danger of Clash With Kremlin

"Gorbomania has swept away our good sense," said Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, one of 10 lawmakers, most of them Republicans, who joined a pro-Lithuanian rally on the Capitol steps today. Accusing the Soviet Army of "taking prisoners from hospital beds," Mr. D'Amato said, "If the United States backs down now, we will betray our heritage."

Senator Jesse Helms, the senior Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, said President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's "brutal and bloody actions prove that you can always trust a Communist to be a Communist." "The

United States must stand up for freedom," he said.

But Administration officials said the public comments by lawmakers were not being followed by private pressure on Mr. Bush to take stronger action on Lithuania.

Washington's position on Lithuania's claim to independence reflected a growing feeling that Moscow is unlikely to grant immediate independence to Lithuania, officials here said. The United States not only can do little

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to change that, they said, but was dangerously close to a confrontation with the Kremlin that could jeopardize progress toward democracy in Eastern Europe and Mr. Gorbachev's promises of change in the Soviet Union.

Officials said there had been a fundamental political decision that those considerations outweigh Lithuania's quest for immediate independence — as long as Mr. Gorbachev refrains from the kind of bloody crackdown that Chinese leaders imposed last year against political dissent.

The Bush Administration did not want to say so publicly, because the United States has historically supported Lithuanian independence, never acknowledging that Lithuania is part of the Soviet Union despite the annexation of the independent nation by Stalin in 1940. The question of Lithuanian independence is particularly difficult at this time for a Republican Administration, because the Republicans made

the "captive nations" an important part of their Presidential platforms in the 1980's.

In London, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sidestepped demands from members of the House of Commons that Britain denounce Mr. Gorbachev's behavior. She called for "great restraint" on both sides in what is "undoubtedly a very difficult situation, both for President Gorbachev and the people of Lithuania."

Mrs. Thatcher said Britain viewed the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1940 as illegal. But she said it "was recognized as fact in the Helsinki Treaty" of 1975, which was signed by 35 nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union, and endorsed the permanence of Europe's post-World War II borders.

Soviet Move 'Brutal and Unwise'

President François Mitterrand said in a television interview on Sunday, "Our role is not to pour oil on the fire." He continued, "I can imagine the terrible problem that this poses to the Soviet leadership."

Mr. Mitterrand praised Mr. Gorbachev's efforts to democratize the Soviet Union. "There is no reason for us to deny him our confidence so he can pursue this task," he said. "It is up to him, of course, not to dash this hope."

Foreign Minister Sten Andersson of Sweden, which recognized Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, said the Soviet leadership "is behaving responsibly toward Lithuania."

Only Norway clearly denounced the Soviet actions in the Baltic republic, calling the storming of hospitals where army deserters were sheltered "brutal and unwise."

Soviet Diplomat Quotes Quayle

As the White House struggled to maintain its position, it was dealt a slight political embarrassment today when Sergei B. Chetverikov, the second-ranking Soviet diplomat in Washington, quoted Vice President Dan Quayle to defend the Soviet Army's arrest of the deserters in Lithuania.

In Arizona on Saturday, Mr. Quayle said he strongly opposed any use of force in Lithuania. "If the Soviet Union is applying disciplinary measures to people in their own military, that's a different situation," he said.

He added, "I do not know what kind of contractual agreement a member of the Soviet Army has when he or she signs up" and said there "is a certain element of discipline that is absolute imperative in any armed force."

David C. Beckwith, Mr. Quayle's spokesman, said Mr. Quayle "at no time in any way countenanced the forcible capture of army deserters in Lithuania by Soviet troops." Referring to Mr. Chetverikov's comments, he said, "I think it shows a certain desperation on the part of the Soviet chargé, that he would use a call for peaceable resolution of the situation to justify this sort of act."

Limited Choices for U.S.

Noting Congressional calls for recognition of an independent Lithuanian Government, Administration officials argued that broader American interests in a rapidly changing Europe demanded that Washington not recognize Lithuania at this point.

"Do congressmen who want recognition want Gorbachev to continue to withdraw from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland?" one official said. "Do they want to permit German reunification? Do they want the Soviets to continue to create a society based on the rule of law? Obviously, they do, but I don't know whether they have considered what effect our stance on Lithuania has on those things, including the ultimate fate of Lithuania itself."

Officials said the careful nature of American comment on Lithuania reflected a feeling that there is little the United States can do. "I wouldn't interpret what happened today as a softening," he said, "but as a recognition that if every day you're a little more annoyed than the day before, at some point you have to throw a temper tantrum. We don't want to just get red in the face and throw things on the floor, and our practical options are limited."